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Patrick Scott : un art de la réconciliation

Valérie Morisson

- 1 It was a very sad coincidence that Patrick Scott died on January, 14, 2014, just before a major retrospective of his works, entitled *Patrick Scott: Image Space Light* and gathering more than 100 pieces, opened at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and at VISUAL, Carlow.¹ Irish artist Patrick Scott (b. 1921, Cork – 2014, Dublin) is famous for his abstract canvases, more particularly for the gold paintings he made after 1964.² His presence on the international scene (his exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, 1958 and his place at the Venice Biennale, 1993) suggests that his visual synthesis between international formalism and Irish art, largely hinging on the use of gold sheets, reaches far beyond the national. A proponent of geometrical abstraction, he occupies a central place in Irish modern art though critics have long walked a historiographical tightrope, swaying either on the side of his Irish roots or on the side of his continental modernism. By comparing his works and approach to those of international abstract artists, this paper purports to underscore the synthetic quality of his gold paintings. Scott's use of gold, it will be argued, is the core or axis of his artistic vortex.
- 2 Patrick Scott began using gold leaf only in 1964 at a time when he was already well-known as a painter. He first studied architecture at University College Dublin, where he discovered the modernist works of the White Stag Group.³ The latter comprised Basil Rakoczi, who was acquainted with the influential art critic Herbert Read, and Kenneth Hall, who had met Kandinsky and Gertrude Stein in Paris in 1938. Rakoczi and Hall arrived in Dublin in 1940 at a time when the Irish art scene was fairly conservative⁴ and when there was very little critical awareness (Kennedy 2010, 187). In a letter to Patrick Scott dated June 22, 1943, Margot Moffett, who was connected to the group, lamented the "utter lack of awareness in Dublin's cultural life of the significance of the contemporary trends in art (and in non-representational painting in particular)" (Kennedy 2010, 188). The White Stag Group "functioned much more recognizably as part of an urban avant-garde, distinguished by its orientation towards artistic tendencies in Europe or England,

rather than the renewed excavation of familiar themes in Irish culture” (Barber 102). The group organized exhibitions of modern art in Dublin and their gallery comprised works on loan by Dufy, Gleizes, Gris, Picasso, Rouault, or Sickert.⁵ Though it split after the war, it contributed to modernizing Irish art by introducing the continental avant-garde (Walker 23); its members imported much freshness, as well as a bohemian life-style that Scott, a young gay artist, enjoyed. He took part in their exhibition of subjective art (4-22 January 1944, Lower Baggot Street), where he showed seven paintings. These artistic events paved the way for the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (an Irish *salon des refusés* founded in 1943) gathering major Irish modernist artists (Patrick Collins, Tony O'Malley, Norah McGuinness, Mainie Jellett, or Louis le Brocqy) eager to resist the “conservative mediocrity of the Royal Hibernian Academy” (Dunne 20). The catalogue of the Subjective Art exhibition was introduced by Herbert Read himself who asserted that the works on display (which he had not actually seen) were part “of the main stream of European culture”, and exemplified modern art as “a challenge to lazy habits of thought, to tired senses, uneasy minds and complacency of vision” (Kennedy 2013).⁶ Read claimed that the artist's goal was to go beyond “the superficial veil of appearances” to reveal “the inner structure” of things (Kennedy 2013). The text was received with much skepticism in Ireland but such tenets were relevant to Patrick Scott's works. The latter refused both the narrow constraints of nationalism and the idea of a universal spirituality which would underlie modernism, looking for a liberating visual synthesis that he achieves in his gold paintings.

- 3 As a matter of fact, the paintings that Scott made in the 1940-50s, before becoming a full-time painter, betray his taste for simplicity, geometry, and chromatic plainness. His early canvases (*A Box of Pippings*, 1949, private collection; *Courtyard*, 1952) show some striking chromatic monotony, no modeling, and a great simplicity of approach. Scott then worked in a design company and as an architect, which accounts for his taste for structure. In 1955, he met Morris Graves, an American abstract expressionist painter and a member of the Northwest School, who was then living in West Cork. It was Graves who introduced Scott to Japan, Zen Buddhism, and Chinese calligraphy. Gradually the artist's compositions moved towards greater geometric rigour.
- 4 By the 1950s Scott's paintings sold moderately well (Dunne 61) but he represented Ireland in international fairs and was supported by Irish art historian Anne Crookshank. The supporters of modernism celebrated Scott's rigour which they viewed as a long awaited departure from outmoded Irish figurative scenes. Brian Fallon wrote that Scott “possesses an almost flawless taste, which—let's face it—is a very un-Irish quality” (Fallon). The eighteen paintings which Scott contributed to the Venice Biennale in 1960 were disappointingly unappreciated. However, in Ireland, Scott was well-known and supported by the Dawson Gallery.
- 5 In 1960, he embarked on his *Bog* paintings, a series of canvases inspired by the domain of John Huston, the renowned American filmmaker whom he had befriended. Though inspired by a specific Irish landscape deeply tied to history and culture, the paintings are abstract, which evidences Scott's eagerness to avoid the visual clichés of Irish imagery. In this series, Scott uses tempera—a technique that he lastingly favoured—and dripping paint on unprimed canvas. His later works evolved towards even greater emptiness. In his *Device* paintings,⁷ which he created to respond to the use of bombs and weapons, the circle becomes a matrix while the title grows more enigmatic and self-referential. Following from these early experiments, in 1964, Scott began using gold leaf:

One day in the studio, he was rooting through a drawer when he came across a book of gold leaf that had been left over from a design job on a Baptist church. He wondered idly if he could use it in a painting. The short answer was no, at least not in the way he wanted to. Because he was working on unprimed canvas, when he used the standard means of fixing the gold leaf to the ground, an oil-based size, it bled out into the material and left a permanent stain. But at the same time, when he applied the gold to the oatmeal-coloured canvas, something clicked in his mind.

He knew it was what he wanted. (Dunne 86-87)

As Mel Gooding underscores, Scott's art never developed in a schematic, programmatic, or over-determined way (Gooding). After seeking technical advice from a British Museum curator, Scott later used acrylics to avoid stains and carried on using gold leaf until the end of his career.

- 6 The *Gold Paintings*, which strike a perfect balance between many different components, can be viewed as a form of alchemy reconciling opposites, or as a modernist synthesis, given that modernism aims at promoting aesthetic research while preserving the trans-historical properties of tradition (Rose 25). Scott synthesizes multiple sources of inspiration, including prehistoric and non-European art into a modernist visual grammar reaching beyond appearances. This analysis of Patrick Scott's painting, focusing on his use of gold, purports to situate his approach within an international framework. Interpretative debates over the Irishness of Scott's works will be hinted at to justify this international scope.

A formal synthesis

- 7 The synthesis that Patrick Scott achieves is first and foremost a formal one. His gold paintings are constructed on a classical sense of equilibrium and balance, which brings to mind Aquinas' conception of beauty as a combination of integrity, or completeness, right proportion or harmony, and brightness or clarity (Thiessen 214). As a matter of fact, it is through inter-relations between shapes, colours, light, and material that Scott achieves completeness. As Thomas Ogden suggests,⁸ repetition, harmony, symmetry, and their combinations in sequences are at the core of our basic experience of psychological integrity (Gagnebin and Savinel 41).
- 8 In the gold paintings, the richness to which gold is traditionally associated in the arts is counterbalanced by the simplicity of the shapes and the raw canvas. Scott combines geometrical shapes which equilibrate or offset each other. This compositional method is not specific to the Irish painter. His abstract works were painted at a time when there was a renewed interest in the Bauhaus and the strict elegance of minimalism as opposed to American abstract expressionism. Following the path of Malevitch and Kandinsky, Scott gradually reduced his figurative representations to abstract arrangements—to use Kandinsky's terms—of elementary geometrical shapes. As is the case in hard-edge abstraction, the work is stripped of denotative elements to become an autonomous and coherent formal whole. It is noteworthy that gold leaf comes in standard unit, which matches Scott's engagement with geometric rigour (Dunne 97). His compositions are made up of regular lines, stripes, squares, triangles, and circles combined on a flat monochromatic surface. The repetition of multiple arrangements engendering "creations with a lawful organization, variation of forms, and rhythm of motif" is the core characteristic of non-objective painting (Rebay 4). Given that basic forms "offer manifold possibilities for interrelation" (Rebay 11), the paintings are organized into series whose

titles are non-referential. If the circle is almost omnipresent in Scott's compositions, it seldom appears on its own but interacts with other shapes. As Hilla Rebay suggests, "the artistic value of a creation lies in the combination and is brought to spiritual life only by the rhythm and space relationship" (Rebay 11).⁹ Interaction can be understood as rhythmical or musical: Scott's combinations of shapes and colours on an empty and unpainted background bring to mind the principles of tonal harmony in music. Kandinsky, for whom composition was of paramount importance, had compared abstract painting to music; following from Goethe, he argued that what was missing in painting was the "basso continuo" (Bosseur, in Gagnebin and Savinel 99). In Scott's compositions, the thorough bass at the core of harmony would undoubtedly be the golden circle around which various shapes and colours orchestrate an equilibrium.

- 9 Even though monochromes enjoyed a noticeable success in the 1960s-80s, with many exhibitions devoted to what had become a genre (Riout 138-139), Scott never produced monochromes but sought a balance between monochromatic shapes, mostly gold, black, and white ones. None of these colours is exclusively attributed to a shape. The painter's quest for chromatic balance is that of many artists as, according to Italian art historian Vincenzo Trione, every artist strives to inscribe his chromatic impulses into an architecture based on norms and aiming at equilibrium. Colours must be mastered, controlled, submitted to the discipline of drawing and lines, and driven into a perfect geometrical order (Rose 144). Contrary to painters like Delaunay in France or Balla in Italy, who also experimented with colour combinations, Scott reduces his palette to some basic colours. Not unlike Josef Albers who, in his handbook entitled *Interaction of Colours*, lays emphasis on the dynamic interplay of colours, Scott explores the kinetic properties of his combinations.
- 10 Trained as an architect, Scott pays much attention to structure and to the balancing and weighting of shapes. The composition of some of the gold paintings tends to be symmetrical so that all turmoil or turbulence is evacuated. The equilibrium between lightness and gravity is achieved through the presence of the golden circle. The circle is Scott's own epitome of the golden section and his familiar places housed many circles (Fergusson). Kandinsky considered that dots and points were "*un petit monde à part*", worlds of their own, isolated and detached from the space surrounding them, static and endowed with some concentric energy (Kandinsky 35-37). In the gold paintings, the roundness of the circles often contrasts with the sharpness of the lines. Contrary to Malevitch, who explored the dynamism of aslant or off-centered shapes, Scott seeks both stability and lightness. He often places the circle in a central position, but in some canvases, the circle extends beyond the limit of the stretcher to suggest transience and openness. The use of gold and light, rather than colours, enables him to offset the immobility and weight of the circle so that it seems to be floating above the lines, particularly in the *Meditation Paintings*. Unrelentingly, Scott aims at reconciliations.
- 11 In the gold paintings, another formal synthesis operates as the shining golden areas are countervailed by the dull, mat quality of the unprimed background and the coloured lines. In works where gold and black paint interact, Scott opens a dialogue between day and night, light and darkness, translucence and opacity. Black does not reflect light, contrary to white and gold (Rose 14) so that its dullness is neutralized by the transparency of the thin white areas and the immateriality of gold. Scott's use of black and white may also be keyed to the habit which developed among 19th-century British painters, among whom Turner—who was fascinated by the combination or contrast of

light and shadow and who was heading towards a dematerialization of painting—to study colours at twilight, so as to concentrate more on shades than on colours. Manet and Whistler also used black and white in contrast to create a formal effect.

- 12 The use of tempera, a technique used since the 1st century AD, and unprimed canvas bestows an inchoate dimension upon Scott's works. The painter had a taste for ancient techniques. Again, his choice echoes that of other abstract artists: Mark Rothko also explored the technique of tempera while Helen Frankenthaler used unprimed canvases. In Scott's compositions, the immateriality of gold, which becomes the reverberation of light rather than the substance, is contrasted with the materiality of the unprimed canvas and the relief of the linen. The absence of painted background may nonetheless be read as a reference to insubstantiality, emptiness, or silence contrasting with the multifarious connotations of gold. Indeed, if gold has been used in art to connote power and social status, it is equally connected to magic rituals, religion and the numinous and may stand for perfection, as the golden ratio suggests. Scott combines the reflecting properties of the material with its symbolical values.

Painting, sculpture and architecture reconciled

- 13 Faithful to the principles elaborated by modernist forerunners, Scott fuses painting, sculpture, and architecture so that principles which are normally foreign to painting, such as construction, circulation, weightfulness, or space dictate both composition and perception. On account of his training and diverse practices (as a designer, architect, and painter), Scott reconciles painting, sculpture, and architecture. He worked for Michael Scott (no family connection) for the Signa Design Agency and was instrumental in the creation of the Kilkenny Design Workshop.
- 14 Michael Scott's buildings are modernist in style and will have influenced Patrick Scott's paintings. In the gold paintings, many lines draw arches or gateways while some compositions look like ground plans. Scott was familiar with Le Corbusier's works and theories. The equilibrium between the shapes and the empty background in his compositions may be compared to the use of empty spaces responding to geometric concrete blocks in Le Corbusier's buildings. The use of the stilt, piloti, or thin columns by the architect brings to mind Scott's thin lines and aerial combinations (*Meditation Painting* 12 and 13 or *Gold Painting* 21).¹⁰ In the Villa Savoie, the main rooms seem to be floating above the piloti, slightly as Scott's golden circles seem to be in levitation over the stripes. Besides, the use of plain concrete and white in Le Corbusier's buildings can be likened to the use of unprimed canvas and a limited range of colours in Scott's works. Like many painters and sculptors working at the time, Scott granted as much attention to the shapes he painted as to vacuity and emptiness. His paintings (*Gold Painting*, 32 and 34) are endowed with a sculptural quality which brings to mind Donald Judd's three-dimensional works.¹¹ Though Judd opted for three-dimensionality to overcome the shallowness of the rectangular plane of the canvas, his pieces are in many respects similar to those by Scott, his stacks (*Untitled*, 1978) evoking Scott's stripes.
- 15 Scott finds an equilibrium between difference and sameness by working in series and on variations. Like many abstract painters, architects, and sculptors working in the 1960s, he seeks renewal through repetition. As previously pointed out, Scott was significantly influenced by Le Corbusier and his use of the cell as a basic unit for the elaboration of the buildings. The small square of golden leaf can be likened to Le Corbusier's dwelling unit.

Like painters such as Brice Marden, Daniel Buren, Josef Albers, or Donald Judd, to name just a few, Scott adopts a template or matrix which is combined in an infinite number of ways. Daniel Buren's considerations on repetition may cast light on Scott's predilection for seriality. The French artist explains that his use of systemized repetition reduces the potency of the form to its minimum but, by becoming perceptively neutral, the inner properties of this form are unravelled. Buren conceives of repetition as a repetition of difference, insisting that repetition allows differences to become visible (*Beware!*, 1969-70, in Stiles and Selz 144-145). His art practice is premised on the absence of authorship and personal commitment, not unlike that of abstract artists who explored the infinite possibilities of a chosen shape: in the late 1940s, Barnett Newman started exploring the vertical line, or zip, in his abstract paintings, all of which are built on this vertical motif; from the 1950s onwards, Josef Albers tested the multiple possibilities of the square in his *Homage to the Square*.¹² In Scott's works, the circle is a trademark, a signature idiom, so that paradoxically the repeated shape, far from being emptied out of meaning, becomes the symbol of the artist. The iridescence of the gold leaves in Scott's works introduces a perceptual instability which is reminiscent of the chromatic instability of Newman's works. Newman, who argued that the painter had to handle chaos and to search for the hidden meaning of life through a metaphysical approach to art, castigated the decorative drift of abstract purism. He advocated plasmic (rather than plastic) art, which is the creation of forms that carry or express abstract thought, or the presentation in tangible symbolism of some inner idea or concept (O'Neill 149). In this perspective, Scott's art is plasmic. Besides, Newman draws a parallel between plasmic art and primitive art. Now, the modernity permeating Scott's works is also derived from his deeply-felt interest in archaic and traditional art forms.

Equilibrium between archaism and modernity

- 16 If Scott elaborates formal balances, he also operates a synthesis out of various influences. Like Irish and international modernists, he reconciles the contemporary and the archaic (Barber 153). His concern with formal values, as well as his fascination with primitive and non-European art, connects him to the international modernist style (Dawson 136).
- 17 Scott loved the gold collection of Celtic objects in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, although he declared never using Celtic forms deliberately (Fergusson). The stripes in his paintings, and the sobriety of his combinations, do bring to mind the Celtic Ogham stones dating back to the 1st century BC.¹³ The painter's circles and spirals are similar to those of the Celtic carved stones (e.g. Newgrange, Drogheda) and evoke the circularity of the Tara brooch. Celtic mural megalith art with its incised geometric forms displays spirals as a metaphor for infinity and rebirth.¹⁴ Besides, the circle is naturally connected to many prehistoric sites testifying to sun-worship, which was part of Celtic religious culture and was dear to Scott (Thiessen 216). The gold leaves used for the circle evoke the light of the sun. The artist was fascinated with heliocentric cosmology (Dunne 98): "I have always been a sun worshipper", he said (Thiessen 101).
- 18 Irish art critic Dorothy Walker has underscored Scott's Celtic inspiration:
 Patrick Scott in his personal preoccupation with geometric abstraction and his sensual appreciation of gold leaf on raw canvas has effected the fusion of abstract mathematics and physical aesthetic beauty which is a criterion of powerful art; and

in particular of the early Bronze Age gold ornaments of Ireland, uniquely elegant and fine among objects of archaic art anywhere (Walker 1982, 135).

- 19 Again, Scott's tapping into ancient artifacts to renew art should be perceived from an international, rather than a national vantage point. Mathias Goeritz, a Mexican abstract painter, also used gold in large monochromatic works which are tied to the prehistoric sites that he visited. In his *Golden Messages* series (1959), he sought to convey a sense of the spiritual through the use of gold. Both in Scott's works and in Goeritz's ones, the use of gold bridges a gap between the past and the present.
- 20 Scott's sources of inspiration were many. Like other abstract painters (such as Kandinsky, who was influenced by Chinese calligraphy or Yves Klein, whose fascination with Japan is well-known), Patrick Scott was deeply influenced by Oriental culture and philosophy. He admitted that the greatest influence on him had been the Japanese flag (Dawson 136). His gold paintings can be likened to visual haikus. In *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes emphasizes Japanese emptiness, which he perceives in the haiku and the tempura. Though it at times lacks clarity, Barthes' reading of the empty sign in Japanese calligraphy may illuminate Scott's works in so far as it purports to go beyond referentiality to foreground emptiness or silence.¹⁵ Scott's screens, decorated in a manner similar to the gold paintings, are obviously influenced by Japanese screens. As to his gestural drawings (*Gestural Drawing*, I and II, 1981), they are inspired by Chinese calligraphy. For the followers of Kandinsky, as well as for Chinese painters, painting is more a means to grasp the internal principles which link one element to the others than to describe external realities. In Chinese painting, the artist must find the *li*, a permanent internal principle (Kandinsky xxxiv).¹⁶ Scott is equally aiming at the core of shapes. After travelling to China, the Irish painter made a series of large, non-perspectival landscapes, *Chinese Landscape* (1986), a series which is more figurative in that it shows the curved contours of mountains. Dorothy Walker considers these paintings as
a perfect example of his genius in extracting the poetic quick from an extremely complex visual reality—the Chinese mountains and their well-known exuberant forms, so familiar from traditional Chinese painting—and expressing this complexity in his own absolutely personal schematic terms. (Walker 1982, 42)
- 21 The parallel curves are redolent of primitive shapes, including Celtic ornaments, as well as of the Japanese garden. The anthropomorphic shapes of the mountains suggest a communion with nature. Though the works remind the viewers of the curvatures of the rocks in Chinese painting, they are equally redolent of early Renaissance works in which the mountains are stylized. Scott compares the mountains he saw in China to cathedrals (Thiessen 218) so that the East and the West, the natural and the artificial are combined.
- 22 Scott's use of gold should also be correlated to the religious iconography of Byzantine and Renaissance painting in which gold symbolizes divine transcendence. Scott had travelled to Venice and Ravenna, where he was enthralled with the mosaics. The use of gold in illuminated manuscripts was equally linked to the inner light of the divine.¹⁷ Interestingly, the techniques of mosaics relied on the optical effect created by tesserae of different colours arranged in a certain way. The technique therefore bears some resemblance with modernist uses of geometric shapes. In some Italian mosaics, the luminosity of the golden tiles is heightened by the use of red glass (Gage 43). Scott's *Gold Square on a Red Sun* evokes this technique. If light, and its shimmering reflection on the uneven tesserae, was absolutely crucial to the conception, decoration, and meaning of early-Christian churches, it is equally conducive to spirituality in Scott's works. The latter

are redolent of orthodox icons too even though the enlightenment that they entail is not religious.

Gold: a meditative material

- 23 Geometrical abstraction was a radical opposition to the use and commerce of art works as means of entertainment: abstract works with a minimalist style provide a space for meditation (Rose 9). Mondrian, Malevitch, and Yves Klein had a mystical approach to abstraction (Rose 27, 34). Scott's works reconcile two strands of abstraction in that they are both material, with gold sheets being endowed with a strong visual materiality and texture, and spiritual. Now, "the spiritual and transcendent in a work of art is its power to point through the material to the immaterial, i.e. to what lies beyond" (Thiessen 99).
- 24 If Goethe had studied the symbolical and moral signification of colours (Gage 194 and Rose 23) and if Michel-Eugène Chevreul was the first to point out that colours were universal (Gage 247), Wilhelm Ostwald, a German chemist who influenced the members of the Bauhaus and De Stijl, later furthered the scientific and psychological analysis of colours to reveal harmonic laws. Ostwald admired the Japanese for their use of colours in architecture and furniture design. To him, colour was neither pigment nor light but sensation (Rose 14). Philosophers have analyzed colours either as subjective or objective. Locke introduced a distinction between primary qualities (i.e. properties such as shape, size, movement, or solidity which are intrinsic to the object) and second qualities which are subjective ideas or sensations. Some abstract painters have emptied the canvas of illusionism and offered their viewers pure objective colours; others (Rothko, Soulages) have explored the luminosity of colour and its variation. By combining black, which is objectively dull and solid, and gold, whose reflection is impermanent, Scott leaves the issue of colour open. His work synthesizes a grammatical, phenomenological, metaphysical, and poetic approach to gold. As Hilla Rebay observed, combinations of pure shapes and colours, "when invented by a genius can bring the same joy, relaxation, elevation and animation of spiritual life as music" (Rebay 4). For Jan Toorrop and Mondrian, both members of the Theosophy society, colours are also related to psychology and spirituality.
- 25 Undeniably, Scott's works have "a pronounced meditative, spiritual quality" (Thiessen 98). Like Canadian painter Agnes Martin, Scott sought quietness and calm. Martin's *Friendship* (1963), which uses incised gold leaf and gesso on canvas, is in many respects comparable to Scott's work. Using subdued colours and a restricted palette in canvases divided into small square units, she explored the potentialities of the grid in her 1960s' compositions. Martin writes "Not that I'm for ascetism / But the absolute trick in life is to find rest" (Stiles and Selz 129). She adds: "Being detached and impersonal is related to freedom / That's the answer for inspiration / The untroubled mind" (Stiles and Selz 131). Martin, by the way, advocates a return to classicism: "I don't believe in the eclectic / I believe in the recurrence / That is a return to classicism" (Stiles and Selz 130). Her words are relevant to Scott's artistic endeavours. Like monochromatic works, his minimalist canvases lead to meditation. Gold is particularly conducive to transcendence and spirituality:

Gold in itself is already an intensification of material reality, more than a symbol of value: an actual measure of value. The perennial dream of the alchemist to transform base metal into gold is not only a metaphor of, but is the reality of, the

artist's function. To possess gold is an ever-recurring human longing, like being able to fly, so that for the artist himself to use actual gold as a means in his intensification of reality is a double intensification of his role, not merely transforming base material into the gold of art, but transforming gold itself into the intensity of art and truth. (Walker 1982, 41)

- 26 The translucence of Scott's works, giving the impression that light passes through them, is a sign of momentariness (Gooding). Yves Klein, who had learned the trade of frame making and gold-leaf gilding also discovered "the profound physical quality of the illumination of matter" in gold.¹⁸ Klein thereafter used gold in his *Monogolds* (1960s) to evoke the driving form of life, and the passage from the visible to the invisible. Many abstract paintings are propitious to meditation. In his article on Scott, Brian Fallon mentions Rothko: "It seems difficult to keep Mark Rothko entirely out of the equation, and indeed Rothko's late, visionary canvases were making an almost universal impact on painters about this time" (Fallon). What Werner Haftmann writes about Rothko's paintings could be written about Scott's: "They are some mediation veils, icons, contemplation paintings, decorated canvases which are like tents dissimulating the divine" (Riout 70).¹⁹ Scott had received a religious education but was not a believer. He nonetheless received several commissions from the Church: a reredos for St Paul's School in London and for the Church of Reconciliation at Knock; a screen for a church in Texas; and canvases representing crosses. However, the spirituality springing from his series is more tightly connected to Oriental traditions as his *Meditation Tables* suggest.²⁰
- 27 Although Patrick Scott travelled to Japan only late in his life, in 1984, Japanese forms and Zen philosophy had a most enduring influence on him. China has a long tradition of metaphysical and introspective painting (Rose 13). Scott's "metaphysical modernity" shows the same philosophical underpinnings as Oriental art (Gooding). His tables for Meditation display mandala motifs; the squares and circles are associated with Zen meditation. Scott's refusal to pour his inner emotions onto the canvas can be seen as a "zen-like contemplative receptivity" (Gooding). His canvases are "painterly realizations of waking dreams" (Gooding).

Conclusion: a historiographical reconciliation?

- 28 As previously evoked, international modernism radically renewed painting and discarded naturalism by exploring pre-Christian art and non-European cultures (Dawson 136). In this respect, Scott's abstract painting partakes of the modernist revolution. It also testifies to the attempt at relocating Irish art and identity in wider international trends.
- 29 In the late 1940s, pro-internationalist figures had been appointed to the Cultural Relations Committee and Arts Council of Ireland. James Johnson Sweeney, a former director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum, also promoted modernism in Ireland by organizing exhibitions such as *Modern Irish Painting* (1963) and taking part in *Rosc*.²¹ He was a member of the Arts Council from 1967 to 1973. Sweeney believed in the autonomy of the artwork and its capacity to express a universal poetic language. Coinciding with Scott's abstract output was *Rosc*, an exhibition taking place in Ireland every four years and trying to import international modernism to Ireland at a time when Seán Lemass promoted artistic, cultural, and economic reconciliations with Europe. This artistic venture was under the aegis of Charles Haughey, who understood its propagandist values: for a "tourist country it was important to be identified with the best in contemporary

culture" (S.B. Kennedy). Scott's synthesis exemplifies the spirit of Rosc, for which the artist drew catalogue covers, in that the manifestation made a link between contemporary art and pre-Christian art. An international exhibition Rosc was curated by a foreign guest aided by a jury composed of three foreign art critics. Even though the name Rosc, i.e. "poetic vision" in Irish, induced a national bias, Irish artists were not represented in 1967 and 1971, which sparked a controversy. Given the political situation of Ireland in the 1970s, and the fierceness of the "Troubles", many Irish artists called for a politically committed figurative art addressing the political situation. Both Michael Farrell and Brian O'Doherty (*Name Change*, 1972, IELA), previously committed to abstraction, altered their practices to respond to the crisis. Yet Scott's art remained universally abstract, trans-historical and above the contemporariness of history. In this respect he endorsed Reinhardt's claim that art should not serve a purpose nor be endowed with meaning (Rose 55). Also, abstract art sold better than politically biased figurative works.

- 30 This historical background casts light on the critical reception of Irish abstraction. In an extremely famous text for the catalogue of the *Irish Imagination*, a subsidiary exhibition of Rosc at the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, U.S.-based critic Brian O'Doherty tries to reconcile formalism and nationalism arguing that Irish modern art distinguished itself by its atmospheric mode: the "atmospheric mode" was, according to O'Doherty, demonstrated by the Irish artist's focus on mythical rather than historical time:

Patrick Scott, more than any other Irish artist, responded to international ideas while producing the most consistently excellent body of work of any Irish artist; hints of the atmospheric abound in his work in which impeccable taste is used not only for self-preservation but as a discreet weapon. (quoted in Kennedy, 2013)

- 31 O'Doherty, Dorothy Walker and later critics emphasized the so-called "elegance" and "taste" of Scott's works.²² O'Doherty's problematic text is part of a long series of catalogues or monographs looking at Irish art from an exclusively Irish perspective regardless of international contacts and influences. This "protectionist approach" imposes a "naturalistic", not to say essentialist reading to Scott's works (S.B. Kennedy). As to the atmospheric quality of Scott's formalism, it is difficult to trace. The sensibility and sensuality that O'Doherty and Walker key to an Irish imagination could be compared to those of paintings by Mark Rothko, Pierre Soulages or Ad Reinhardt.²³ This paper will hopefully have suggested that historiographical reconciliations can also be achieved.

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NOTES

1. The first retrospective of his works was held at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, in 1981.
2. Some of these works can be seen at
<http://www.immacollection.com/eMuseumPlus?service=page/EntryPage>
<http://www.crawfordartgallery.ie/pages/paintings/PatrickScott2.html>
<http://www.lannan.org/art/artist/patrick-scott/>
3. Founded in 1935 in London, the White Stag group was formed around Kenneth Hall and Basil Rakoczi. A proponent of subjective art, Rakoczi was deeply interested in Freudian psychology.
4. Belfast's only serious gallery, Magee's, favoured academic painting. However, in 1947, a new gallery opened in Belfast displaying works by foreign artists. In Dublin, Seán Keating was still Professor of Painting at the National College of Art, where he imposed figurative and narrative works focusing on Irish subjects. Even when they painted in a post-impressionist style, most Irish artists at that time (e.g. Colin Middleton, John Luke, Gerard Dillon, Jack Yeats, Nano Reid, etc.) were figurative painters. Art and historiography from the Irish Free State was largely connected to cultural nationalism. For an overview of this period, see Barber, 85-106.
5. In the preceding decades, Sir Hugh Lane had contributed to sensitizing the Irish public to European painting by establishing a gallery of modern art in Dublin. He had promoted impressionist painting and an Irish school enthusiastically. On Lane, see Fintan Cullen, "The Lane Bequest: Displaying the Modern", in *Ireland on Show, Art, Union, and Nationhood*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2012, 153-173 and Barbara Dawson, Roy Foster, Joanna Shepard, *Hugh Lane: Founder of a Gallery of Modern Art for Ireland*, Scala Publishers, 2008. The Dublin Society of Painters also encouraged visual modernism.
6. "The imagination of the artist has pierced the superficial veil of appearances and revealed the inner structure of what the eye sees," Read wrote in the introduction to the catalogue of Subjective art (unpaginated) (Kennedy 2010, 188).
7. For instance *Big Solar Device*, 1964, 234x153cm, Dublin City Gallery, the Hugh Lane.
8. *The Primitive Edge of Experience*, New Jersey, Aronson, 1989.
9. She adds: "The circle is a concentrated continuity in itself, isolated and floating in its own importance, not influenced by what is within or without. The square has eight sides, four within and four without. It gives and receives space, and also points with its corners in further directions. The square, it seems, is a more spiritual form in relationship to space. The triangle, perhaps, less spiritual, emphasizes by pointing from an indifferent base. These are perfected absolute forms of purity and beauty" (Rebay 11).
10. *Gold Painting 21*, c. 1975, 122x123.7cm, Crawford Art Gallery (cat. 135-P):
<http://www.crawfordartgallery.ie/pages/paintings/PatrickScott2.html>
11. As Judd stressed, "two colours on the same surface almost lie on different depths. An even colour, especially in oil painting, covering all or much of a painting is almost always both flat and infinitely spatial" (Stiles and Selz 115). Judd is interested in the fact that sculpture is "made part by part, by addition, composed" (Stiles and Selz 115); he uses mostly monochrome parts and basic geometrical units that are endlessly combined.
12. In 1959, Albers made a gold-leaf mural, *Two Constellations*, for the Corning Glass building in Manhattan.
13. These vertical stones bearing primitive inscriptions testify to the existence of an alphabet in Celtic cultures. They inspired Brian O'Doherty's abstract sculptures and may also be keyed to Scott's compositions.
14. Beltane festivities of rebirth include the maypole dance which is circular.

15. See Anne-Marie Christin, *Poétique du blanc : vide et intervalle dans la civilisation de l'alphabet*, postface : Le Japon selon Barthes, Paris: Vrin, 2009, 197.
16. See Shitao, *Les Propos sur la peinture du moine Citrouille-amère*, trans. Pierre Ryckmans, Paris: Hermann, 1984, chap XV.
17. Early Christian art first used golden tesserae for the halo of Christ as an indication of divine light before artists created golden backgrounds in the cathedral of Monreal near Palerma for instance to play with light and testify to the wealth of their commissioners (Cage 41).
18. <http://mediation.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-klein-EN/ENS-klein-EN.htm#or>
19. "Ce sont des voiles de méditation, des icônes, des tableaux de contemplation, des toiles de tente décorées qui dissimulent le divin". Exhibition catalogue, *Mark Rothko*. Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1972, IX.
20. See *Meditation Table IX*, 1991, IMMA.
21. While Rosc showcased abstract art and the students of the National College of Art and Design in Dublin rebelled against the conservatism of the teachings, modernism was still considered dangerous.
22. "Scott is an artist of unerring, absolute taste, which, while encasing the extra-sensitive core of his art, externalises that core by means of a superb and exact order" (Walker quoted in R. Kennedy).
23. Reinhardt's statement (Lines of Words on Art, 1958) can partially cast light on Scott's compositions: "6. Painting as 'not a likeness of anything on earth.' 7. Icon as image as idea as symbol as ideal as form as icon. 8. Icon as device, diagram, emblem, frame, game, sign, spectacle, etc. [...] 10. Painting as absolute symmetry, pure reason, rightness. 11. Painting as central, frontal, regular, repetitive. [...] 17. Outlines, monotones, blankness, quiescence, premeditation. [...] 23. The extremely impersonal way for the truly personal" (Stiles and Selz 90-91).

ABSTRACTS

Patrick Scott (1921-2014), a major Irish artist, is remembered for his large abstract compositions based on the use of gold leaves. Although his works have regularly been analysed in connection with Celtic art, his style and practice are heavily influenced by international abstraction and modernist architecture. His large canvases, often hinging on a golden circle, achieve a synthesis: each series experiments with formal and chromatic combinations which map out a visual grammar and blend western and eastern influences. Though attached to Ireland, the painter was fascinated with Chinese and Japanese cultures. Scott was influenced by Le Corbusier's architecture as well as by the abstract painters of the 1960s-70s. His visual compositions, based on the use of the gold leaf, enable him to revisit a material, a technique and a format that have long been tied to transcendence and spirituality.

Patrick Scott (1921-2014) est un artiste irlandais connu pour ses compositions abstraites utilisant des feuilles d'or. Bien que son héritage celtique ait été souligné, ses choix artistiques témoignent de l'influence de l'art international (architecture, sculpture, peinture). Ses grandes toiles abstraites, souvent composées autour de cercles d'or, réalisent une synthèse plurielle : chaque série explore des équilibres formels et chromatiques supposant qu'une forme pure n'a de valeur qu'en rapport à d'autres et les influences orientales croisent les sources celtes. Attaché à la culture irlandaise, le

peintre est aussi fasciné par les cultures chinoises et japonaises. Influencé par l'architecture de Le Corbusier mais également par les peintres abstraits des années 1960-70, Scott déploie un vocabulaire visuel centré sur la feuille d'or, conscient de revisiter à l'aune de l'abstraction un matériau, une technique et un format de tout temps associés à la transcendance et la spiritualité.

INDEX

Mots-clés: or, feuille d'or, art abstrait, modernisme, spiritualité, sérialité, art celte, Rosc

Keywords: gold, gold leaf, abstract art, modernism, spirituality, seriality, Celtic art, Rosc

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